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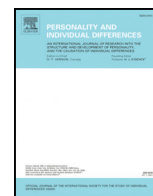
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Explaining workplace delinquency: The role of Honesty–Humility, ethical culture, and employee surveillance



Reinout E. de Vries^{a,b,*}, Jean-Louis van Gelder^c

^a VU University Amsterdam, The Netherlands

^b University of Twente, The Netherlands

^c Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement (NSCR), The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

In this research the effects of personality and organizational characteristics on workplace delinquency were investigated. In a sample of 455 respondents from a wide variety of organizations, two personality traits, HEXACO Honesty–Humility and Conscientiousness, and two organizational characteristics, ethical culture and employee surveillance, explained a significant amount of variance in workplace delinquency. No interaction effects between personality and organizational practices in the explanation of workplace delinquency were found. Results are discussed in light of the role of personality and Routine Activity Theory in predicting unethical behaviors, delinquency, and/or occupational crime in organizations.

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Workplace delinquency is extremely costly for organizations. For instance, employee theft in the retail sector alone had an estimated cost of \$18.1 billion in lost revenue in 2012 in the U.S. (Hollinger & Adams, 2014). Figures such as these may even be conservative, given that they do not take into account ‘gray’ zones of workplace delinquency, such as ‘time’ theft, ‘job benefit’ losses (e.g., telephone misuse), vandalism, and lower performance due to, for instance, drug use at work. Furthermore, loss estimates may be much higher still if one takes into account additional social costs, such as ensuing conflicts and distrust among employers and employees. Consequently, for organizations, the prevention of workplace delinquency carries major financial and social benefits.

Prevention can take two forms: 1) selection of the ‘right’ employees, and 2) modification of employee behaviors through (informal and formal) organizational control systems. In this study, we examine both. Specifically, we focus on employee integrity as captured by the HEXACO Honesty–Humility personality trait, which has been found to be the most important personality predictor of (workplace) delinquency (e.g., Lee, Ashton, & De Vries, 2005), and on two organizational control systems, that is a) an organization’s ethical culture and b) its

use of employee surveillance practices. Additionally, we investigate whether Honesty–Humility interacts with ethical culture and employee surveillance in the explanation of workplace delinquency.

1. HEXACO Honesty–Humility

The HEXACO model of personality posits that personality is most optimally described using six dimensions that together form the HEXACO acronym, that is, Honesty–Humility, Emotionality, eXtraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to experience (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Like its predecessor, the Big Five model of personality (Goldberg, 1990), the HEXACO model is grounded in a cross-cultural lexical approach, and although there is still debate on the ‘optimal’ structure of personality, recent evidence suggests that the maximum cross-culturally replicable personality space indeed comprises six instead of five factors (De Raad et al., 2014).

The main difference between the Big Five model and the HEXACO model is the inclusion of Honesty–Humility in the latter. Honesty–Humility is defined on its positive pole by sincerity, fairness, greed avoidance, and modesty, and on its negative pole by slyness, injustice, greediness, and pretentiousness. At work, Honesty–Humility has been found to be negatively related to all kinds of counterproductive or delinquent behaviors, such as counterproductive work behavior (Wiltshire, Bourdage, & Lee, 2014; Zettler & Hilbig, 2010), workplace delinquency or anti-social behavior (Lee, Ashton, & De Vries, 2005; Lee, Ashton, &

* Corresponding author at: VU University Amsterdam, Department of Experimental and Applied Psychology, Van der Boeorchestraat 1, 1081 BT Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Tel.: +31 20 5988718.

E-mail address: re.de.vries@vu.nl (R.E. de Vries).

Shin, 2005), sexual harassment (Lee, Gizzarone, & Ashton, 2003), and unethical leadership (De Vries, 2012). Accordingly, people low in Honesty–Humility seem to be more likely to use and abuse the organization for personal—e.g., material, social, and sexual—gains. In line with these findings, we expect Honesty–Humility to be negatively related to workplace delinquency.

2. Ethical culture and employee surveillance

Ethical culture and employee surveillance can be considered two different organizational solutions to employee norm violations. Ethical culture, defined by Kaptein (2009, p. 262) as “the informal control system of an organization [which] encompasses the experiences, assumptions, and expectations of managers and employees about how the organization prevents them from behaving unethically and encourages them to behave ethically” can be considered a ‘soft control’ system. That is, ethical culture influences behaviors indirectly through its focus on shared organizational attitudes and norms vis-à-vis workplace delinquency. Ethical culture has been found to be an important predictor of unethical behavior (Kaptein, 2010). That is, organizations with high levels of corporate ethical virtues are less likely to have employees who behave unethically. The relation between ethical culture and unethical behaviors seems to be stronger than the more often researched relation between aspects of ethical climate (Victor & Cullen, 1988) and dysfunctional or unethical behaviors (see Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010; Martin & Cullen, 2006, for meta-analytic reviews).

Employee surveillance can be defined as the formal control system of an organization, which encompasses the checks and monitoring practices through which an organization attempts to prevent employees from behaving unethically. In contrast to ethical culture, employee surveillance can be considered a ‘hard control’ system. That is, instead of goading employees into behaving ethically through its culture, organizations using employee surveillance enforce ethical behaviors by actively monitoring deviations from organizational norms. Much less research attention has been paid to the formal (employee surveillance) control system than to the informal (ethical culture) control system. According to the Routine Activity Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979), lack of surveillance (or: guardianship) is one of the three factors, together with motivated offenders and suitable targets, that account for the occurrence of crime. When there is surveillance, opportunities for (workplace) delinquency are curtailed. According to this perspective, opportunity makes the thief. For example, retail stores with more sophisticated surveillance systems have been found to report lower levels of theft, both by employees and shoplifters (Hollinger & Adams, 2014). And in industries in which employees work in jobs with less strictly controlled access to goods and money, higher levels of theft have been reported than in industries in which this access is relatively restricted (Hollinger & Davis, 2006). Based on the findings on ethical culture and employee surveillance, we expect both to be negatively related to workplace delinquency.

3. Personality–organization interactions

To our knowledge, no research has so far addressed possible interactions between personality on the one hand and ethical culture or employee surveillance on the other, although research has investigated the interaction between Honesty–Humility and perceptions of organizational politics (Wiltshire et al., 2014; Zettler & Hilbig, 2010) and the interactions between personality and situational strength (Meyer et al., 2014) in the prediction of counterproductive work behavior. Both Zettler and Hilbig (2010) and Wiltshire et al. (2014) found that Honesty–Humility interacted with perceptions of organizational politics such that lower levels of Honesty–Humility were more strongly associated with counterproductive work behavior when higher levels of organizational politics were observed. Perceptions of organizational politics

pertain to perceptions of illegitimate and unsanctioned workplace behaviors that are intended to maximize self-interest (Chang, Rosen, & Levy, 2009)—behaviors that are less likely to occur in an ethical culture. Consequently, the results of these studies seem to suggest that in an unethical culture, lower levels of Honesty–Humility will be more strongly related to workplace delinquency.

We also expect Honesty–Humility to be more strongly related to workplace delinquency when employee surveillance is low rather than high. Counterintuitively, Meyer et al. (2014) found that Conscientiousness had a stronger (negative) relation with counterproductive work behavior when levels of organizational ‘constraints’ (e.g., organizational control mechanisms that reduce autonomy) were high rather than low. However, their study focused on general work constraints whereas our study focuses on employee surveillance. Opportunities to act unethically for people low on Honesty–Humility may be more restricted when surveillance systems are in place or when employees have limited access to valuable goods or information. Furthermore, when an ethical culture suggests or dictates what are ‘right’ behaviors, employees low on Honesty–Humility are probably less likely to commit delinquent acts because—when found out—such behaviors may result in a loss of status or position in the group or organization.

To summarize, we hypothesize that both personality in the form of Honesty–Humility and two organizational factors—ethical culture and employee surveillance—predict workplace delinquency. Honesty–Humility, ethical culture, and employee surveillance are believed to have both independent and interacting relations with workplace delinquency, with the highest levels of workplace delinquency observed when Honesty–Humility, ethical culture, and employee surveillance are low.

4. Method

4.1. Sample and procedure

Data were collected in three waves, each two weeks apart. In total 1672 members of a large-scale ISO certified research panel, who worked in a wide variety of organizations, were approached to fill out a number of questionnaires, of whom 913 (54.6%) responded in the first wave. The second wave contained 736 participants, and the third wave 590 participants. Of these 590 participants, we retained 455 participants (27.2%) who had worked in their company for three years or more (for explanation, see below and Footnote 3). This final sample consisted of 206 (45.3%) women with a mean age of 45.6 ($SD = 10.5$), with the following educational background: 89 (19.6%) primary or secondary lower level education, 227 (49.9%) secondary higher level or tertiary lower level education, and 139 (30.5%) tertiary higher level education. With respect to religiosity, 206 (45.3%) respondents indicated that they were either atheist or agnostic whereas 249 (54.7%) were affiliated with one of the main religions or considered themselves to be ‘spiritual.’ On average, respondents had worked for 14.3 years ($SD = 10.1$) and occupied, on a 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest) scale denoting the hierarchical level, a mean hierarchical position of 2.9 ($SD = 1.0$) in their organization. The top five occupational sectors represented in the sample were government/security, education, medicine/wellness, trade/commerce, and business services and the respondents worked in a wide variety of jobs (e.g., as an operator, accountant, librarian, bus driver, or teacher).

4.2. Instruments

4.2.1. HEXACO-PI-R

Ratings on the 208-item Dutch HEXACO-PI-R (De Vries, Wawoe, & Holtrop, *in press*) were obtained in the first wave of data collection to measure the six personality domains, Honesty–Humility (H), Emotionality (E), eXtraversion (X), Agreeableness (A), Conscientiousness (C), and Openness to Experience (O), and two interstitial facets,

Altruism and Proactivity.¹ Each domain scale contained 32 items and the two interstitial facets—which were not used for this study—each contained 8 items. All items were rated on a 1–5 (strongly disagree–strongly agree) scale. Earlier research has shown the six HEXACO domain scales to have adequate psychometric properties, with alpha reliabilities $> .80$ and generally low ($< .35$) domain scale intercorrelations (De Vries, Ashton, & Lee, 2009; Lee & Ashton, 2004). In this study, the HEXACO-PI-R alpha reliabilities ranged between .84 and .91 and none of the intercorrelations between the HEXACO scales exceeded .30 (Table 1).

4.2.2. Ethical culture

The ethical organizational culture scale (Kaptein, 2008; henceforth 'ethical culture'), which was administered in the second wave, contains 58 items, rated on a 1–6 (strongly disagree–strongly agree) scale. The items are divided among eight facets, Clarity, Congruency of Supervisors, Congruency of Management, Feasibility, Supportability, Transparency, Discussability, and Sanctionability, each represented by four to ten items. Although conceptualized as distinctively different elements of an ethical culture, empirically the facets of corporate ethical virtues tend to be strongly interrelated, with average relations reaching parity when corrected for unreliability (see Kaptein, 2011, for correlations between the facets of corporate ethical virtues). Except for Feasibility, which had negative correlations ranging between $-.20$ and $-.45$ with the other facets, all facets had intercorrelations $> .60$ with each other in our study and consequently a Principal Component Analysis indicated a very large first factor explaining 41.1% of the variance in the items. Consequently, and because we didn't have any specific hypotheses on the facets, we summated—after reverse coding Feasibility—all items into an overall ethical culture scale, which had an alpha reliability of .97.

4.2.3. Employee surveillance

An organizational employee surveillance scale (henceforth 'employee surveillance'), which was administered in the second wave, was constructed especially for this study. The scale is based on an extensive online security scan tool, containing 43 scenarios, of a large Dutch security and surveillance company. The security scan tool identifies eight 'security-risk' categories, such as physical surveillance, incident response, ICT-security, purchase, sales, money surveillance, screening, and social media. For our study, we decided to focus on four categories that were deemed most relevant and observable for employees in their daily work, namely: physical surveillance, money surveillance, purchase, and sales. Based on the scenarios and together with two experts from the Dutch security and surveillance company, the authors constructed nine items of which eight were retained in this study.² The English translations, obtained using a back-translation procedure of the original Dutch items, are provided in Appendix A. The items were answered using a 1–5 (strongly disagree–strongly agree) format, but were reverse coded so that higher scores are associated with more surveillance. The alpha reliability of the scale was .85.

4.2.4. Workplace delinquency

Two separate scales measured workplace delinquency. The first—work delinquency—scale, administered in the second wave,

consisted of the following four items, "At work I have sometimes improperly used the internet or telephone for personal purposes," "I have never declared more from a work account than I actually spent" (reverse coded), "I have sometimes taken sick leave while I actually skipped work for another reason," and "I have sometimes taken things home from work for personal use," which were answered on a 1–5 (strongly disagree–strongly agree) scale. The second scale consisted of nine items taken from the Workplace Behavior Questionnaire (WBQ; Ashton, 1998) and was administered in the third wave. The items of the WBQ regarded estimates of delinquent behaviors in the workplace of the past three years,³ such as theft, vandalism, absenteeism, and alcohol use at work, measured on a 1 to 8 scale with different scale anchors. Because both scales had relatively low alpha reliabilities—that is, .52 for the work delinquency scale and .60 for the WBQ—and correlated moderately at .39 ($p < .01$), we decided to combine them (after transforming the scores on the items of the former to a 1–8 scale). Earlier research has provided evidence for the validity of self-reports of the WBQ (e.g., Lee, Ashton, & De Vries, 2005), but to further shore up the evidence, we checked for the validity of this combined 'workplace delinquency' scale using respondents' unethical decisions in six independent organizational scenarios, which were offered at the end of the third wave.⁴ The self-reported workplace delinquency scale correlated .46 ($p < .01$) with criminal choice behaviors—stronger than the WBQ and workplace delinquency scales separately (respective r 's = .41 and .35; both p 's $< .01$). This provides evidence for the convergent validity of the workplace delinquency scale.

5. Results

An overview of the correlations and descriptives of the variables is provided in Table 1. Table 2 displays the results of the regression analysis. Because educational level, religiosity, organizational tenure, and hierarchical level were virtually unrelated to workplace delinquency, we only entered gender and age in the first step of the regression analysis plus five of the six HEXACO scales. Especially Conscientiousness, and to a lesser extent Agreeableness and gender explained variance in workplace delinquency. In the second step, we entered Honesty–Humility, ethical culture, and employee surveillance. All three variables explained incremental variance in workplace delinquency. In the third step, after standardizing and multiplying the variables involved, we entered four interaction terms. Not only did we enter the interactions between Honesty–Humility and both ethical culture and employee surveillance, but also—as additional exploratory analyses—the interactions between ethical culture and employee surveillance and between all three independent variables. None of the interaction terms explained a significant amount of variance in workplace delinquency. All variables combined explained 21% (adjusted $R^2 = .19$, $p < .01$) of the variance in workplace delinquency.

A relative weight analysis was used to shed light on the relative importance of the predictor variables. Relative weight analyses determine the proportionate contribution of multiple independent variables and provide a more accurate estimate of the relative importance of independent variables than a regression analysis does when collinearity of independent variables is possibly involved (Johnson, 2000). According to this analysis the four most important variables were Honesty–Humility (34.1% of the total explained variance), ethical culture (16.4%), Conscientiousness (14.3%), and employee surveillance (9.6%).

¹ Altruism is an interstitial facet which is related to Honesty–Humility, Emotionality, and Agreeableness, but not to Extraversion, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience. In contrast, Proactivity is an interstitial facet related to Extraversion, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience facet, but not to Honesty–Humility, Emotionality, and Agreeableness. Information about the interstitial Proactivity facet can be found in De Vries et al. (in press).

² In accordance with the original scenarios on which they were based, most items were written to reflect lower levels of employee surveillance. Only one item, on sales surveillance, was formulated in the reverse-coded direction, but this item was removed because of its divergent content and low item-rest correlation. Future research might like to include more reverse-coded items.

³ Because we asked for delinquent behaviors in the past three years in the WBQ, we had to remove participants who did not work for the past three years in the same company, reducing our sample from $N = 590$ to $N = 455$. Highly similar results were obtained with the larger ($N = 590$) sample.

⁴ We could not use the unethical decisions as outcome variables in our study because the scenarios did not address behaviors of the respondents in their own organization whereas the workplace delinquency items did. For more information on the content and psychometric properties of the scenarios, please contact the authors.

Table 1Correlations, alpha reliabilities (italicized on diagonal), and descriptives ($N = 455$).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Gender (0 = F/1 = M)	–														
2. Age	.28	–													
3. Education (1 = Lo–3 = Hi)	–.19	–.19	–												
4. Religiosity (0 = No/1 = Yes)	–.07	.10	–.07	–											
5. Organizational tenure	.28	.52	–.17	.07	–										
6. Hierarchical level (1 = Lo–5 = Hi)	.08	.00	.07	.06	.01	–									
7. Honesty–Humility	–.11	.12	.06	.03	.06	–.08	.89								
8. Emotionality	–.36	–.07	.05	.23	–.01	–.07	.19	.88							
9. Extraversion	.01	.00	.12	.01	–.03	.13	–.05	–.21	.91						
10. Agreeableness	.15	.06	–.01	.04	.06	–.02	.29	–.12	.15	.88					
11. Conscientiousness	–.04	.02	.03	.06	.03	.07	.19	–.09	.25	.11	.84				
12. Openness to experience	.08	.12	.30	.01	–.11	.08	.00	–.08	.25	.11	.05	.89			
13. Ethical culture	.05	.02	–.08	.02	.04	.10	.13	.04	.17	.14	.16	–.03	.97		
14. Employee surveillance	.00	.12	–.10	.08	.08	–.31	.20	.14	–.11	.00	.01	–.05	–.01	.85	
15. Workplace delinquency	.11	–.08	–.01	–.02	.04	.08	–.34	–.05	.01	–.15	–.22	.09	–.21	–.17	.67
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
<i>M</i>	.55	45.56	2.11	.55	14.30	2.90	3.69	3.11	3.33	3.02	3.45	3.14	4.20	3.88	2.17
<i>SD</i>	.50	10.48	.70	.50	10.07	1.00	.43	.43	.46	.40	.36	.49	.66	.76	.58

Notes: at $|r| > .09$, $p < .05$; at $|r| > .12$, $p < .01$.

The interaction terms only accounted for 5.7% of the total explained variance in workplace delinquency.

6. Conclusions and discussion

The outcomes of this research show that workplace delinquency is mainly predicted by the personality variables Honesty–Humility and Conscientiousness and by the organizational variables ethical culture and employee surveillance. Together, these four variables explained 15.8% (74.4% of 21.2%) of the variance in workplace delinquency. The findings on personality are in line with earlier research showing the importance of Honesty–Humility and Conscientiousness in the prediction of counterproductive behaviors (e.g., Lee, Ashton, & De Vries, 2005; Zettler & Hilbig, 2010). The findings on ethical culture and employee surveillance are in line with Routine Activity Theory. A review of research on the Routine Activity Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) shows that surveillance (or: guardianship) interventions reduce crime

(Hollis-Peel, Reynald, van Bavel, Elffers, & Welsh, 2011). The present study adds to a small but growing body of research that shows the effectiveness of surveillance.

Routine Activity Theory also predicts that criminal activities are more likely to occur when motivated offenders, suitable targets, and lack of guardianship converge in time and space (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Workplace delinquency then should be more likely to take place when people low in Honesty–Humility (i.e., high motivation for crime) are part of a work setting that lacks an ethical culture and which is characterized by low levels of employee surveillance. No such effect was found in our study, indicating that personality and organizational characteristics appear to act separately on workplace delinquency. That is, people low on Honesty–Humility are not more likely to commit workplace delinquency when norms are lax (e.g., in an unethical organizational culture) and/or when opportunities for workplace delinquency abound (e.g., with less employee surveillance).

This is somewhat in contrast with findings of Zettler and Hilbig (2010) and Wiltshire et al. (2014), who found an interaction between Honesty–Humility and perceptions of organizational politics in the prediction of counterproductive work behavior. One possible explanation of the difference in findings is that perceptions of organizational politics items mainly focus on negative organizational behaviors (see Kacmar and Carlson (1997) for the items) whereas the ethical culture items mainly focus on positive organizational behaviors. One of the ethical culture facets—Feasibility—actually focuses on negative (or unethical) aspects of the organizational culture and we conducted a separate moderated regression analysis to find out whether an interaction was present for Feasibility, but none ($\beta = -.01$, $p = .91$) was observed. Future research might like to further investigate possible interaction effects by combining ethical culture, employee surveillance, and perceptions of organizational politics in one research design.

One of the main limitations of our study is that the variables were all self-reported. However, care was taken to separate the personality predictors (T1) from the organizational characteristics and workplace delinquency predictors (T2 and a combination of T2 and T3, respectively), which reduces common method bias. Furthermore, workplace delinquency was found to have high levels of convergent validity with unethical decisions in six organizational scenarios. Although common method biases can attenuate interaction effects (Siemsen, Roth, & Oliveira, 2010), Ashton and Lee (2010) have shown that source common method factors associated with self-rated HEXACO personality are relatively weak when compared to trait factors. Furthermore, the two organizational characteristics, which were measured more closely

Table 2Regressions (beta coefficients and relative weights) of workplace delinquency on predictor variables ($N = 455$).

	Workplace delinquency			
	Step 1 (β)	Step 2 (β)	Step 3 (β)	rw (%)
Step 1				
Gender (0 = F/1 = M)	.14**	.12*	.12*	5.2%
Age	–.12*	–.07	–.07	2.7%
Emotionality	–.03	.05	.06	0.6%
Extraversion	.05	.05	.04	0.8%
Agreeableness	–.17**	–.07	–.08	6.6%
Conscientiousness	–.21**	–.14**	–.14*	14.3%
Openness to experience	.11*	.09*	.08	3.9%
Step 2				
Honesty–Humility (HH)		–.24**	–.23**	34.1%
Ethical culture (EC)		–.16**	–.17**	16.4%
Employee surveillance (ES)		–.11**	–.12**	9.6%
Step 3				
HH*EC			.04	2.2%
HH*ES			.00	0.3%
EC*ES			.08	2.6%
HH*EC*ES			.05	0.6%
ΔR^2	.11**	.09**	.01	
R^2 /Total rw (%)	.11**	.20**	.21**	100%

* $p < .05$.** $p < .01$.

in time to workplace delinquency, were entirely unrelated to each other ($r = -.01, p = .88$), making it less likely that common method biases in both variables have influenced the relations found.

One of the reasons that there is not much literature on the interaction between personality and unethical culture may be that these interaction effects are often absent in field studies (however, see Zettler and Hilbig (2010) and Wiltshire et al. (2014)). Apart from the fact that this makes it particularly important that these null findings get reported (i.e., to prevent researchers from investing in research that is unlikely to bear fruit), there may be a number of substantive reasons for this absence: 1) shifting norms (as exemplified by either high or low ethical culture and surveillance) may lead to shifting expectations of what is deemed unethical or not. That is, (mis-)use of goods in organizations may be deemed acceptable or at least not unethical in one department or organization, whereas it may be deemed unacceptable and unethical in another department/organization. These shifting norms may result in a general shift of behaviors, both of people low and high in Honesty–Humility resulting in a lack of interaction; and 2) even in organizational contexts with more surveillance and a higher ethical culture, opportunities for crime may still abound. Their drive for material gain and status may therefore lead people low in Honesty–Humility to seek out self-enriching opportunities even when the situational context is not conducive of crime.

To conclude, our research provides evidence for the importance of Honesty–Humility, Conscientiousness, ethical culture, and employee surveillance in the prediction of workplace delinquency. Especially in companies in which workplace delinquency carries large costs, employers may be advised to select on Honesty–Humility and Conscientiousness, to create an ethical culture which is clear, congruent, and feasible, and which is openly supported, discussed, and enforced by its members, and to make sure that proper surveillance mechanisms are in place for employees who have access to valuable material and financial organizational means.

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Conflict of interest statement

The Dutch version of the HEXACO-PI-R has been released for commercial purposes. A percentage of the profit from sales will be used by the University to support the research of the first author.

Appendix A

Employee surveillance scale

1. I have unsupervised access to organizational money.
2. I can use organizational accounts to buy goods without being held accountable.
3. I can execute payments from one or more organizational accounts without others' knowledge.
4. Nobody checks the exact amount of goods that is present in the organization.
5. I have unsupervised access to organizational goods.
6. I can spend employer money without being held accountable.
7. I can give away information or goods for free without being held accountable.
8. I can independently buy goods without others' knowledge.

Note: The items are answered using the following answering scale: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neutral (3), agree (4), strongly agree (5). All items are recoded so that higher scores denote higher levels of employee surveillance.

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